DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 124 299 PS 008 653

AUTHOR Sutton-Smith, Brian
TITLE Informal Learning of Young Children: Discussion.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 19-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creativity; Discovery Learning; *Early Childhood Education; *Learning Processes; *Nonformal Education; *Play; Social Development; *Socialization; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Informal Learning; *Inversive Theory

ABSTRACT

This paper, a discussion of papers by Robert S. Randall, Greta Fein, Richard Bauman and Murray Newman, looks at informal learning from an anthropological viewpoint with an emphasis on inversive theory. It is suggested that the irrational elements of informal learning, the combinations of order and disorder, allow children to relate to reality by creating a reality of their own. Informal learning then becomes a way to use the familiar to explore the unfamiliar, helping the child anticipate behaviors in a preadaptive rather than a directly socializing way. It is proposed that informal learning will be most effective when its inversive elements are explored, that through the alternation of familiar and unfamiliar the child's imagination will be the center of focus in a learning situation. (SB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED124299

PS008653

Informal Learning of Young Children: Discussion

Symposium, A. E. R. A. Annual Meeting, 1976, San Francisco

Brian Sutton-Smith

Psychology Department, Teachers College

Columbia University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Discussion on papers presented by: Robert S. Randall, Greta Fein, Richard Bauman and Murray Newman

Let me first express my appreciation and enjoyment at being present at this important meeting. I am of the opinion that social scientists of the future may well regard as an anomaly our long neglect of children's informal learning. They may well ask why we so long ignored the data at our doorsteps in favor of the relatively artificial behavior of laboratories and classrooms. It is gratifying to see the present "scientific" efforts to overcome the failure. Still, although my own life has been involved in the same vocation that is represented here, I feel it is my role as discussant to raise any difficulties that I see with the present approaches.

What I wish to do is to suggest that the participants have unnecessarily limited their notion of "informal learning". In the papers today I detect two major types of definition. The first is sociological. It says that informal learning is that sort of learning which in the past has been neglected and regarded culturally as unimportant. The present speakers suggest that on the contrary these supposedly trivial matters are the basis for the complex behaviors of adults as these are described by writers like Barker, Goffman and Garfinkel. Fein clearly states that the children's pretend behaviors socialize them for group entry, group roles and the child culture. Newman states that analytic problem solving in life can be trained by analytic problem solving in games. Bauman implies, somewhat more cautiously, that riddles and knock knock jokes socialize children for verbal art, and perhaps consolidate communicational competences acquired elsewhere. Fein's and Newman's

socialization is anticipatory, Bauman's is consolidative, which is like the difference between the play theory of Groos and the play theory of Piaget. They are both preparatory theories but have this difference in emphasis.

Randall presents a psychological view of informal learning which derives its connotations from the writings of theorists such as Moor (autotelia), Berlyne (intrinsic motivation) Csikszentmihalyi (flow) in which stress is laid upon the individual's control, his pleasure, high feedback, self-awareness without self-consciousness and the vividness of the emotional states. The major argument here is that children in these states of voluntary behavior learn more because they are more motivated.

What is not fully represented here today is a third view which I will call the anthropological one. Randall describes an eight stage system of voluntary learning which begins at one end with fairly cautious and sober routine exploration and goes to the other end with more variable "adaptational" play. What he neglects to mention is that at the more variable end there is often a great deal of unsober nonsense. Amongst those who have observed these differences in animals (Welker, 1961; Chevalier-Skolnikoff, 1973) and humans (Hutt, 1971), this irrational end has usually been called play. In recent years anthropologists have been become increasingly interested in this irrational end of the continuum although in their case it is usually rites of reversal that is the subject-matter. Is there any sense amongst today's speakers that informal education must deal with the irrational, with the madness of being children, of being human? There are certainly hints of it, in Newman's mention of "unusual uses", in Bauman's outrageous "knock knock" jokes and even in Fein's demonstration that at 12 months of age the infants are already too big for their bottles. Still these droplets of madness are not the major focus. Attention to more voluntary learning is being advocated but with a subordination to a rationalist stance. Although I make these strictures, I feel fairly confident that the participants will happily go along with the rite of reversal I am practising in this discussion. They simply needed the excuse to let down their informal hair.

Theories of Play

A brief note of play theory history might help to clarify the distinctions I am making. Most of the earlier theories and some of the more recent ones basically accept the work ethic notion of play's triviality, but they do imply it has some auxiliary function in life. This prophylactic group of theories which includes notions of surplus energy, relaxation, recreation, recapitulation and abreaction bring play into the sober sphere of social science in a remedial capacity only. Although they do in an incidental way, as in the recapitulation theory of atavisms, and in the psychoanalytic theory of compensation, note its madness. These theories constitute a partial rehabilitation of play theory into rational discourse. Compared with the opposition of the early nineteenth century towards expressive areas, this was a notable step forward. The next group, however, constitute a quite marked oscillation towards sobriety. These are the Preparatory theories, which begin with Groos, and continue today in most theorizing about animals (Aldis, 1976) as well as in Piaget. These theories all assume play has some sort of socializing fuctio[n] human development. The child plays so that he may grow up. I fear that most of [y]'s speakers are in this camp.

Because of this I would call their attention to some 40 years of theorizing about sports and games and play in which the same assumption has been made, and innumerable studies, sociological and anthropological, carried out (to which I have contributed), but in which little attention has been given to what in fact gets socialized.

So strong has been the assumption that socialization did indeed occur that most investigators in these fields have been satisfied to note a correlation between the game or sport form and some cultural variable. They have seldom examined causal linkages. My own work with Roberts is a case in point. Having shown games of strategy to arise in post neolithic conditions of social class complexity we assumed a relationship between the figures on the chess board and the complexities of the social system. We did not give equal attention to the demonstration of that relationship in empirical terms, or if you will, to transfer.

Fortunately there is a new vein in socialization research in play in which there is interest in the relationship between experimentally manipulated play and other competences. To date most of this is to be found in the game simulation area (and today's paper by Newman represents a welcome use of real games in the same way), or in the creativity area, where a number of researchers have shown that play increments are accompanied by increases on creativity test scores (Dansky & Silverman, 1973; Feitelson & Ross, 1975). Here there is a burgeoning concern with demonstrating transfer, and I predict a healthy future for these forms of rationalism. Although we should note this is a focus on the variables that mediate transfer rather than on transfer itself.

Still while conceding that play is at times prophylactic and at times socializing (and the extent probably varies with age and culture) it would be my belief that we are now at a stage when we need a new order of play theories which deal directly with the irrational elements in play, in short with that part of informal learning which is play.

The inversive theories of play

I think it is important to note that for a number of years now anthropologists have been wrestling with the problem of the inversive. They have ceased looking at rites of reversal (where the poor act wealthy and the wealthy act poor, where men act like women and women like men etc.) as if they were abnormalities in the system, as if they were cathartic excesses requiring the porphylaxis of annual ventilation. Instead they have come to suggest that alienation and conformity are the twin poles of all social systems; that each commitment to a norm breeds an alien alternative, sometimes fantasied sometimes ritually enacted. The two are linked together as structure and anti-structure as Turner has suggested (1974). Informal education is not merely on a continuum with formal education, as some slightly less rational extension of it in this way of thinking. On the contrary it is its enemy.

Let me give you one example of a story told by a seven year old in our narrative project. As time goes by with story taking in this project, children use us with increasing freedom for fantasy story telling, Their stories become a particularly free form of play. With some agility you can call these stories a form of socialization but it seems to me to do only that is to miss the main point, force, and importance of irrationalism on the informal play scene.

> A baby was walking down the street making rouble and when the baby saw a man passing her, she said," You suck your buggers, 3 times, yeh, yeh." Then they went to a music studio and they heard, "Keep coming in ABC, ABC, ABC, 1, 1, 2." And then the baby said, "I can do the whole alphabet. ABC DEFGHIJKLMNOPQRS and TUV, W and XYZ. That's how!" And then the baby said, "I spit at you," and then she spitted in the air. Then the baby said, "ABC my bugger!" Then the baby said, "I think I'm so smart just because I have one tooth out." Then the baby said, "I am superman, you can't hurt superman." Then the man said, "You're messing up the whole music studio. Kick the baby out." Then another baby said, "I never saw a baby with a mousteche," while putting his fingers on his nose. Then he said, "Me Chinese, me tell joke, me go peepee in your coke." And when the baby that was getting kicked out said,"You're not Chinese, you're American."
>
> Then they saw 3 ladies kicking their legs up and saying, "Legs, legs, legs are here!' Then the girl said, "I save my eyelashes every day." And then the baby said, "I think I'm so great because my teeth don't need to be fixed." Then the baby walked into an A & P Wee-O Store and everyone was saying, "Wee-O!"
>
> Then the baby said, "It passed my bed-time, I better find my way home." Then he accidently walked into a museum while the guard was asleep, and he climbed up a plastic tree and there was a rope hanging on it and he said, "Me Tarzan!" Then the boys swinged out the window and about a mile and landed through the chimney into his house and said, "Me Santa Claus." And then he climbed into bed and went to sleep. That's the end.

When one looks more closely at some of the present papers there is hint there also of this kind of lust for upsetting the world. Obviously Bauman's riddlers and jokers, like to put others on the spot. Even Fein's babies who keep reaching for the big world and testing it out on baby dolls are masters of their own freedom and their own nonsense.

A Dialectical Theory of Play

Phenomena of this sort are not exceptional in play, they are everywhere, once you start looking for them. I have elsewhere written of games of order and disorder, the major point of which is a play upon the themes of anarchy and chaos. In

Ring a Ring a Roses, a highly formal, informal pastime, it ends with all the girls falling over on the ground, a triumph for disorder over order, although getting it all together in the first place is a triumph for order. Games deal with such oppositions. In Mother May I, the mother-like girl gives out autocratic orders (you must say "please") but meantime the players cheat. And as we all know play at "schools" is often a play at simulated naughtiness. One can analyse games on either the meta level or the structural level and show throughout an interweaving of oppositions. I habe elsewhere considered these oppositions in terms of the player's intentionality, their reversal of social controls, their taking of turns, their variability of tactics, (cheating) their identity reversals, their reversals of fate, their rule reversals and their playfulness; also the way in which games at the adolescent and adult level can lead to cultural reversals (Sutton-Smith, in press). In play, the dialectic is between the player and "reality". He opposes reality with his own play reality. In the game the relationship exists, but is also encapsulated within the oppositions in the rules (as in winning and losing). Then there is the meta game in which the would-be players argue about who gets to go first, who gets to be first base. Sometimes the relationships in this metasystem are reversed by the game, sometimes replicated (Sutton-Smith, 1966). In sports the meta system (in terms of coaches, audiences and referees) becomes a part of the game functioning and new oppositions arise.

There is a nice clue in Greta Fein's study as to how this dialectic works within the play itself. She gives the example of the infant using something already well mastered, bottle feeding, and applying that to something novel yet to be mastered, that is the bottle feeding of someone else, the doll. Using what is familiar, the baby is able to explore that which is unfamiliar. Similarly when children first get into riddles, they use something which is familiar (questions and answers) to explore something which is unfamiliar (incongruous replies). Or in Bauman's descriptive routines they use the familiar (categories have central attributes) to explore the unfamiliar (categories can have quite peripheral attributes). Now if we focus our attention on that

which is replicated in the play, that which is familiar, we naturally think that play consolidates that which has already been learned (Piaget's position), but if we apply our focus to the novel transformation (the inversion, the reversal, the irrational etc.), then we think that play anticipates life with novel repertoires.

It is my own view that even when play does anticipate it does so in a preadaptive, not a directly socializing way. Play potentiates responses, rather than directly prepares them. Those play potentiated responses will have to find their way back into other cultural systems. Play anticipates through adaptive potentiation only.

Informal Learning as Creativity

We see that informal learning can be applied to exploratory learning. Here, although the child's behavior is voluntary, what the explorer does is an attempt to find out and discover things. His behavior is subordinated to the nature of the stimuli he is examining. Traditional education would undoubtedly be happy with this kind of informal education, because it brings motivation to the learning without really setting him free. When play occurs there is always a more total reversal of control. The player makes distinctions that the explorer cannot. He is relatively unbounded and therefore uncontrollable. First play is usually fairly repetitive. Although Fein's infant is in charge, what he does is quite routine. Life is replicated. Or as in Bauman's case, the younger children attempt to master the knock knock routine although in a fairly incomplete way. Their play transformation consists in being in charge of the routine rather than doing it well. As time progresses however, and familiarity becomes assured, there is usually a transition to increasing variability, and sometimes to nonsense. It is at this

point that the traditional educator grows uneasy.

And yet we see in this dialectic between the replicated event and the transformed event the essence of playfulness. When the same tension and the same novelty are applied to some medium of words or materials that has meaning for others, it also becomes the essence of creativity. Creativity lies in this tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In our film project at Teachers College, for example, we have found that the child film makers do their most sophisticated technical work on those parts of their narrative with which they are most familiar (the central characters and home bases). They are creative first in the areas with which they are most familiar.

The education system which carefully seeks to explore this alternation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the archetype and the novel, between what is replicated and what is reversed, has not yet been even comceptualized. And yet that is the ultimate promise of informal learning, that it leads us into the heartland of the child's own imagination. Unfortunately, informal education is more likely to be socialized to an attenuated work ethic. Its inversions are likely to be neglected for its prophylaxis, or its inversion foreswarn for its socializations.

I would urge on the present speakers that they take more faith in the inversive elements in their research; not because these inversive elements are sufficient in themselves, but because in combinations with the voluntary exploration of familiar territories, they achieve a dialectic of self transformation which can be the heartland of an entirely different kind of education. An education which places the tensions of the child's imagination at the center of focus.

Bibliography

Aldis, C. Play fighting. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

Berlyne, D. E. Conflict arousal and curiousity. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960.

Chevalier-Skolnikoff, S. The primate play face. Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, 1973.

Dansky, J. L. & Silverman, I. W. Effects of play on associative fluency in preschool children. Developmental Psychology, 1973, 9, 38-43.

Hutt, C. Exploration and play in children. In R. E. Herron and B. Sutton-Smith (Eds.) Child's Play. New York: John Wiley, 1971, 231-251.

Feitelson, D. & Ross, G. S. The neglected factor play. Human Development, 1973, 16, 202-223.

Moore, O. K. & Anderson, A. R. Some puzzling aspects of social interaction. Review of Metaphysics, 1962, 15, 409-433.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. Flow: studies of enjoyment. P. H. S. Report University of Chicago, 1974.

Peterson, L. Constraining the child's story telling situation. Does it make a difference. Ph. D. Dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University, 1976.

Turner, V. W. Limonal to liminoid in play, flow and ritual: an essay on comparative symbology. Rice University Studies, 1974, 60, 53-92.

Sutton-Smith, B. Role replication and reversal in play. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 1966, 12, 285-198.

Sutton-Smith: The dialectics of play. Bundesinstitut für Sportwissenshaft, Koln, in press.

Welker, W. I. An analysis of exploratory and play behavior in animals. In D. W. Fiske and S. R. Maddie (Eds.). Functions of varied experience. Illinois, Dorsey Press, 1961.